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US seizes oil tanker linked to Russia in North Atlantic

• White House says crew will be prosecuted; Hegseth asserts naval blockade in full effect 'around the world'
• Trump boasts of getting '30-50m barrels' of crude; energy secy claims US will control Venezuelan oil 'indefinitely'

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday seized a Russian-flagged oil tanker in the North Atlantic after pursuing it from off the coast of Venezuela, in an operation that incensed Moscow.

Washington claims the tanker is part of a so-called 'shadow fleet' that carries oil for countries such as Venezuela, Russia and Iran in violation of US sanctions, and seized it despite the ship even though it was escorted by a Russian naval submarine.

The vessel had thwarted an earlier attempt to board it last month near Venezuela.

"The vessel was seized in the North Atlantic pursuant to a warrant issued by a US federal court," the US European Command, which oversees American forces in the region, said in a statement on X.

After the seizure of the Russian oil tanker, Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth posted that the US blockade on Venezuelan oil was in full effect "anywhere in the world".

Later, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said that the crew of the seized oil tanker was subject to prosecution.

"The vessel had a judicial seizure order... so that means the crew is now subject to prosecution for any applicable violation of federal law, and they will be brought to the United States for such prosecution, if necessary," she said.

Russia slams US action

Russia's Transport Ministry slammed the oil tanker's seizure, saying "freedom of navigation applies in waters on the high seas, and no state has the right to use force against vessels duly registered under the jurisdiction of other states".

"In accordance with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, freedom of navigation applies in waters on the high seas, and no state has the right to use force against vessels duly registered under the jurisdiction of other states," Russia's transport ministry said in a statement.

The vessel — which changed its name from Bella-1 to Marinera — had received "temporary permission" to sail under the Russian flag on December 24, the ministry said, adding that "contact with the ship was lost" after US naval forces boarded it "in the open sea, beyond the territorial waters of any state".

The US military also announced a second sanctioned tanker ship had been seized in the Caribbean Sea.

Last weekend, US special forces had seized Venezuelan President Nicol s Maduro and his wife from Caracas in an unprecendented raid, and took them to New York "to face trial on drug charges".

Since then, President Donald Trump has said that the US will "run" Venezuela and US companies will control its critical oil industry.

He is due to meet with US oil executives on Friday (tomorrow) over plans for Venezuela's oil sector.

Earlier on Tuesday, Trump said that 30-50 million barrels of "high quality, sanctioned" Venezuelan crude will be shipped to US ports, with the revenue — perhaps more than $2 billion at current market prices — placed under his personal control.

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright later added that Washington would control sales of Venezuelan oil "indefinitely".

It was not clear whether Venezuela's new ruler — interim president Delcy Rodriguez — has agreed to hand over the oil, how the plan would work, or what its legal basis would be.

China may switch to Iranian crude

Meanwhile, Chinese refiners are expected to switch to heavy crude from sources including Iran in coming months to replace Venezuelan shipments halted since the US kidnapped the country's president, traders and analysts said.

China, the world's biggest crude importer, is a major buyer of discounted sanctioned oil from Russia, Iran and Venezuela.—Agencies

THIS undated handout photo released by the US European Command's X account on Wednesday shows what US European Command says is the seizure of the M/V Bella 1 oil tanker in the northern Atlantic Ocean.—AFP

Pakistan, Saudi may turn loan into JF-17 deal, sources say

Reuters says sale may be worth $4bn, follows landmark defence pact

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are in talks to convert about $2 billion of Saudi loans into a JF-17 fighter jet deal, two Pakistani sources said, deepening military cooperation months after the two nations signed a mutual defence pact last year.

The talks underscore how the two allies are moving to operationalise defence cooperation at a time when Pakistan is facing acute financial strain and Saudi Arabia is reshaping its security partnerships to hedge against uncertainty about US commitments in the Middle East.

The mutual defence deal was signed following Israel's strikes on what it said were Hamas targets in Doha, an attack that shook the Gulf region. One of the sources said the discussions were limited to the provision of JF-17 Thunder fighter jets, the light combat aircraft jointly developed by Pakistan and China and produced in Pakistan, while the second source said the jets were the primary option among others under discussion.

Sources said the total deal was worth $4bn, with an additional $2bn to be spent on equipment over and above the loan conversion. The sources close to the military with knowledge of the matter spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak on the deal.

Air Chief Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu was in Saudi Arabia for bilateral talks including on "military cooperation between the two sides", Saudi media outlet *SaudiNews50* said on social media platform X.

Tested in combat

Amir Masood, a retired Air Marshall and analyst, said Pakistan was in talks about or had finalised deals with six countries to provide equipment including JF-17s and electronic systems and weapons systems for the jets. He said those countries included Saudi Arabia, but could not confirm any details about the negotiations. The JF-17s marketability has been increased because "it is tested and has been used in combat," he said, adding that it's also cost effective. Pakistan has said the aircraft was deployed during its conflict with India in May last year, the heaviest fighting between the neighbours in decades.

Pakistan's military and finance and defence ministries and military did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Saudi Arabia's government media office also did not respond.

The mutual defence pact, signed in September, committed both sides to treat any aggression against either country as an attack on both, significantly deepening a decades-old security partnership.

Pakistan has long provided military support to the kingdom, including training and advisory deployments, while Saudi Arabia has repeatedly stepped in to support Pakistan financially during periods of economic stress. In 2018, Riyadh announced a $6bn support package for Pakistan, including a $3bn deposit at the central bank and $3bn worth of oil supplies on deferred payment. Saudi Arabia has since rolled over deposits multiple times, including a $1.2bn deferment last year, helping Islamabad stabilise its foreign exchange reserves amid chronic balance-of-payments pressures.

Arms sales outreach

Pakistan has in recent months stepped up defence outreach as it seeks to expand arms exports and monetise its domestic defence industry. Last month, Islamabad struck a weapons deal worth more than $4bn with Libya's eastern-based Libyan National Army, officials said, one of the country's largest-ever arms sales, which includes JF-17 jets and training aircraft. Pakistan also held talks with Bangladesh on the possible sale of JF-17s.

On Tuesday, Pakistan's defence minister said the success of its weapons industry could transform the country's economic outlook.

"Our aircraft have been tested, and we are receiving so many orders that Pakistan may not need IMF in six months," Khawaja Asif told broadcaster *Geo News*.—Reuters

Zalmay asks Islamabad to have fresh accord with Kabul

Dawn Report

KARACHI: A day after the military's chief spokesperson assailed the Afghan Taliban for not honouring their pledges in the Doha Agreement, one of the architects of that accord suggested that Pakistan should consider entering into a similar deal with Kabul.

Zalmay Khalilzad, who served as special representative to Afghanistan during the first Trump administration, tweeted on Wednesday that it was "a misunderstanding… to think that the agreement covered Afghanistan-Pakistan issues".

In a post on his X account, he also attached the text of the agreement, which — among other things — contained a commitment to prevent the soil of Afghanistan being used by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.

However, he posited that "a similar agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan… would serve the interests of both countries".

Expanding on the idea, Mr Khalilzad said that the accord should be one "in which both countries commit to not allow any individual or group including ISIS and TTP to use its territories to threaten the security of the other, and in which they accept third party monitoring of such."

"Based on recent conversations with Taliban leaders, I believe they are prepared to negotiate such an agreement. And it could be game-changing for the relations between these two neighbours," he wrote on X.

Mr Khalilzad, who facilitated negotiations between Kabul and Washington to secure the freedom of US citizens being held in Afghanistan, is viewed by both capitals as an invaluable interlocutor.

In Washington circles, Mr Khalilzad is viewed as a hawk. He openly sympathises with jailed PTI founder Imran Khan and has — in the past — reserved critical words for Pakistan.

No crackdown on protesters, Pezeshkian orders

Outside threats won't be tolerated, warns Iranian army commander

PARIS: Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian on Wednesday ordered security forces not to crack down on economic protests, drawing a distinction between peaceful demonstrators and armed "rioters".

The statement comes as Iranian cities continue to see a wave of protests against economic hardship triggered by price rises and currency collapse.

While Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) claimed at least 27 protesters died during the demonstrations that kicked off with a shopkeeper's strike on Dec 28, Iranian media outlets reported 13 deaths, including members of the security forces and a policeman.

In a video released by the news agency, *Mehr*, after a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Iran Vice President Mohammad Jafar Ghaempanah said Pezeshkian had ordered that no security measures be taken against the demonstrators. "Those who carry firearms, knives and machetes and who attack police stations and military sites are rioters, and we must distinguish protesters from rioters," Ghaempanah added.

Warning to Iran's foes

Gen Amir Hatami, commander of the Iranian army and one of its most senior military officers, warned Tehran will not tolerate outside threats "without responding".

According to the *Fars* news agency, Hatami said "if the enemy makes a mistake," Iran's response would be more robust than during last June's 12-day war with Israel.

In recent days, US President Donald Trump has threatened to intervene in Iran if demonstrators were killed, while Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed support for the protests.

But the economic protests have attracted international attention, including from the leaders of the Iran's international foes.

"We're watching it very closely. If they start killing people like they have in the past, I think they're going to get hit very hard by the United States," Trump said.

Netanyahu told Israel's cabinet: "We stand in solidarity with the struggle of the Iranian people and with their aspirations for freedom, liberty and justice."

The latest demonstrations have spread to the capital's Grand Bazaar, and several more towns and cities.

On Tuesday, clashes erupted in the Grand Bazaar for the first time since the protests began, with police using tear gas to disperse crowds. In one case, gas drifted into a hospital, which is 2km from the bazaar. To disperse a crowd, "tear gas was used in the alley adjacent to the Sina Hospital", the *ISNA* news agency reported, citing a statement from the Tehran University of Medical Sciences.

Elsewhere in Tehran, calm returned on Wednesday as residents conducted business as normal.—Agencies

UN asks Israel to end its 'apartheid system'

UN rights chief points out systematic asphyxiation of Palestinians' rights in occupied West Bank

GENEVA: The United Nations on Wednesday said decades-long discrimination and segregation of Palestinians by Israel in the West Bank were intensifying, and called on the country to end its "apartheid system".

In a new report, slammed by Israel, the UN rights office said "systematic discrimination" against Palestinians across the occupied Palestinian territories had "drastically deteriorated" in recent years.

"There is a systematic asphyxiation of the rights of Palestinians in the West Bank," UN rights chief Volker Turk said in a statement.

"Whether accessing water, school, rushing to hospital, visiting family or friends, or harvesting olives — every aspect of life for Palestinians in the West Bank is controlled and curtailed by Israel's discriminatory laws, policies and practices," he said. "This is a particularly severe form of racial discrimination and segregation, that resembles the kind of apartheid system we have seen before."

A number of independent experts affiliated with the UN have described the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories as "apartheid" but this marks the first time a UN rights chief has applied the term.

Israel's diplomatic mission to the UN in Geneva slammed the report's "absurd and distorted accusations of racial discrimination" against Israel.

The report said the Israeli authorities "treat Israeli settlers and Palestinians residing in the West Bank under two distinct bodies of law and policies, resulting in unequal treatment on a range of critical issues".

"Palestinians continue to be subjected to large-scale confiscation of land and deprivation of access to resources," it added.

This had led to "dispossessing them of their lands and homes, alongside other forms of systemic discrimination, including criminal prosecution in military courts during which their due process and fair trial rights are systematically violated".

Turk demanded on Wednesday that Israel "repeal all laws, policies and practices that perpetuate systemic discrimination against Palestinians based on race, religion or ethnic origin".

The discrimination was compounded by continuing and escalating settler violence, in many cases "with the acquiescence, support and participation of Israel's security forces", the rights office said.

More than 500,000 Israelis currently live in settlements in the West Bank, occupied since 1967 and home to around three million Palestinians.

Violence has risen in recent years, surging especially since the start of Gaza war in which Israeli troops and settlers have killed more than 1,000 Palestinians in the West Bank.

According to official Israeli figures, at least 44 Israelis, both soldiers and civilians, have been killed in Palestinian attacks or Israeli military operations in the same period.

Since the Gaza war began, Israeli authorities had also "further expanded the use of unlawful force, arbitrary detention and torture", the report said.

Increased "repression of civil society and undue restrictions on media freedoms (and) severe movement restrictions" had also characterised "an unprecedented deterioration of the human rights situation" in the West Bank, it said.—AFP

White House says Trump weighing military action in Greenland

Denmark's prime minister warns use of force will break Nato bloc apart

BRUSSELS: The White House said on Tuesday President Donald Trump is discussing options including military action to take Greenland — despite a warning from Denmark that an attack would spell the end of Nato.

But how high really is the risk that Trump's desire for the territory might end up sinking an alliance that has underpinned Western security for over seven decades? The answer depends on whether the US president is really planning to make a move and if the spectre of military force is just a bluff to exert pressure.

Observers spell out three scenarios regarding how the situation could break down:

US ups threats

In the wake of his military intervention in Venezuela, Trump set off alarm bells in Europe by repeating his insistence that he wants to take control of Greenland.

The mineral-rich semi-autonomous territory, part of Denmark and home already to a US military base, has been in Trump's sights since his first term in office (2017-2021).

But this time around his administration has ramped up its rhetoric by insisting "acquiring Greenland is a national security priority".

"The president and his team are discussing a range of options to pursue this important foreign policy goal, and of course, utilising the US military is always an option," White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said.

That came despite a warning from Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen that an attack on a Nato ally would end the alliance — and a show of support for Copenhagen from key European leaders.

Military route?

While Trump was willing to deploy US military might against Venezuela, using force against a close ally like Denmark is a different ball game.

French President Emmanuel Macron said he couldn't "imagine a scenario" under which Washington would violate Danish sovereignty.

Any US military action against Greenland would effectively tear Nato apart.

Its Article 5 pledge that members will defend each other if attacked is meant to deter threats from outside - and the idea its key power would turn on an ally was seen as inconceivable.

Under an existing agreement with Denmark, the United States could already station more troops in Greenland if it wants.

Officials at Nato have repeatedly played down the prospect Trump could invade, but admit that with the US leader they can never be sure.

"We don't believe he would — there is no need — the US can get any access they want from Denmark," a Nato diplomat said.

"But given the persistent rhetoric, we can't be entirely sure."

So far, there has been no sign of the sort of military buildup witnessed around Venezuela and some US officials have been pressing other options.

Media reported that Secretary of State Marco Rubio told lawmakers Trump wants to buy Greenland rather than attack it - and the hope from Nato is that diplomacy will win out.

"I hope the Danes, the Greenlanders and the Americans will sit around a fire somewhere and an outcome will be reached," another Nato diplomat said.

Nato steers clear

So far the military alliance, as an organization, has tried to stay out of the Greenland issue.

"I don't think this issue will ever be brought up in a Nato framework in order to avoid any divisions," a third diplomat said.

With Russia's war raging in Ukraine, European members are desperate not to jeopardise US involvement in helping to shield them from Moscow.

Alliance chief Mark Rutte has tried to deflect US interest by emphasising joint efforts to bolster security in the Arctic against threats from Russia and China, a key justification by Trump for wanting Greenland.

"The Danes are totally fine if the US would have a bigger presence than they have now," Rutte told *CNN*. "We have to make sure that the Arctic stays safe."

While the alliance takes a backseat, some more bullish European members may try to be more assertive.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said Paris was talking to Germany and Poland to come up with a plan for a possible response.

There are fears, though, that just by raising the prospect of attacking an ally — or pressuring it to cede territory — the United States may have already damaged Nato.

"No one has any interest in a quarrel within Nato, except our enemies," said Belgian Defence Minister Theo Francken.

"I'm convinced initiatives will be taken in the coming days, behind the scenes or in the open, to resolve this situation," he said.—AFP

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